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SUBJECT: OMANI MINISTERS VOICE INCREASING CONCERNS OVER REGION'S STABILITY

CLASSIFIED BY: Gary A. Grappo, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) In separate farewell calls by the Ambassador May 9-11, Deputy Prime Minister Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud bin Mohammed Al Sa'id, Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusef bin Alawi, and Minister of Health and Deputy Central Bank Governor Ali Moussa expressed Oman's growing anxiety over disconcerting developments in Yemen, Pakistan and Iraq with potentially adverse repercussions on Oman. The comments by the three suggest the matter has risen to the level of discussion within Oman's Cabinet of Ministers. End summary.

Yemen on Their Minds

¶2. (C) All three of the ministers started off with dire references to the situation in Yemen. Various highlighting Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's uncertain grip on his government, rising discontent among southern Yemenis, increasing anti-government activities by tribes, growing corruption, declining economic fortunes, and continuing government "incapacity," the ministers spoke apocalyptically of Yemen's future and implications for Oman. Of gravest concern, was the uncertain succession question and mounting fortunes of Al Qa'ida in Yemen. All three expressed dread at the prospect of Abdullah Saleh leaving the scene, Sayyid Fahd wondering aloud, "Who else is there that anyone trusts or has confidence in?" FM bin Alawi said that the Yemenis have asked for more GCC aid, but lack the capacity to spend and haven't been able to tap what the GCC has already made available.

¶3. (S) Bin Alawi confirmed that General Ali bin Majid al-Ma'amari, Minister of the Royal Office and Chief of the Office of the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, had recently visited Sana'a and had succeeded in convincing Abdullah Saleh to allow Yemeni Guantanamo detainees to be returned to Saudi Arabia and not Yemen. Said bin Alawi, "Otherwise they would have been walking the streets of Sana'a or, more probably, joining Al Qa'ida." Both bin Alawi and Sayyid Fahd voiced doubts about the ability of Yemeni security forces to deal effectively with Al Qa'ida or even unruly tribes and about the future of Yemeni leadership. In his visit with Abdullah Saleh in Sana'a, Ali Majid was told that governing Yemen was akin to "standing on the edge of a pit full of snakes." Ali Majid reportedly counseled, "Then, kill the snakes."

Foreboding over Pakistan

¶4. (C) The three ministers were especially interested in the recently concluded trilateral meeting (U.S.-Afghanistan-Pakistan) in Washington and actions the U.S. will take to mitigate the crisis in Pakistan. Bin Alawi counseled that in formulating a strategy, the U.S. must take care to separate Al Qa'ida from the Taliban. The former doesn't speak for the latter but essentially seeks to use the Taliban to further its aims worldwide. The Taliban has no interests outside of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Health Minister Moussa underscored the importance of U.S. military might in confronting the Taliban but also urged that we formulate a "social marketing" program to convince Pakistanis in the tribal areas to abandon the "backward ideology" of the Taliban. He suggested employing respected moderates and getting them the necessary "air time" to voice moderate views to Pakistanis and Afghans. Each of the three referred to "chaos" in the region in the event of a

Taliban incursion into Islamabad, however short-lived.
Apprehension over U.S. Military Withdrawal from Iraq

15. (C) Sayyid Fahd and Minister Moussa sounded misgivings over the U.S. military's intended withdrawal from Iraq. All three wondered if Iraq would be able to manage its own security after U.S. forces withdraw in 2011. "I don't think they will be able," MUSCAT 00000433 002 OF 002 asserted Moussa, "and you or someone else would have to come back." Moreover, he allowed, only the U.S. could ensure that Iraq's meddling neighbors -- specifically referring to Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Syria -- keep their distance. The Ambassador interjected that Iraq's Arab neighbors, especially GCC states, could ameliorate post-withdrawal apprehensions by acting collectively to support the current government and incorporate Iraq into regional affairs. Moussa argued that it would not be enough.
Comment

16. (C) The ministers' comments are noteworthy for two reasons. First, that they all spoke similarly in tone and language on all three issues suggests that the issues have risen to the level of discussion within the Council of Ministers. Second, with the exception of references to its interests in Iraq, Iran was never mentioned. In fact, Iran represents a far greater existential threat to neighboring Oman, but the government seems mollified for the present given recent U.S. statements about initiating a dialog with Tehran. However, Oman's historical bC*te noire of instability in Yemen may force Oman to dust off old plans for dealing with terrorists and refugees moving closer to its borders.
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